

The Arab Spring: Comparing U.S. Reactions in Libya and Syria

by

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The Arab Spring began in December 2010 and blew across North Africa and the Middle East, resulting in outcomes from the implementation of modest reforms, to the peaceful yet often violent removal from office of long standing dictators. The United States claimed national interests were at stake when it joined the European powers in an air campaign to save civilian lives from Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's violent oppression of peaceful demonstrations. Meanwhile, events in Syria continue to unfold with all indications of minimal foreign intervention while the regime of President Bashar al-Assad continues to put down insurrection using violent and deadly methods. What explains the contradictory reaction by the United States to the rebellions in Libya and Syria? Maintaining European access to Libyan oil and the presence of a unified, organized political opposition in Libya contributed to United States policy decisions to take action in defense of civilian lives. In Syria, several factors, including the lack of an organized opposition, potential for destabilization in the region, and vetoes by Russia and China on U.N. Security Council Resolutions against Syria underscore the United States' reluctance to take similar action in Syria.

THE ARAB SPRING: COMPARING U.S. REACTIONS IN LIBYA AND SYRIA

There are very few moments in our lives where we have the privilege to witness history taking place. This is one of those moments. This is one of those times.

—President Barack Obama¹

The Arab Spring or Arab Awakening is a watershed event in the broader Middle East and North Africa with immense ramifications for the people and governments of the region, as well as the rest of the world. Although the definitive outcome of the Arab Spring is unclear, intermediate results vary greatly from one country to another. Opposition movements in Saudi Arabia have convinced the leadership to implement limited political and economic reforms such as women receiving the right to vote in parliamentary elections. Rebellions in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen have convinced the autocratic leaders to flee or at least cede power to others, while Muammar Qaddafi was violently removed from power in Libya following his capture and subsequent execution by rebel forces. Meanwhile, Bashar Al-Assad continues his aggressive campaign to crush any symbol of resistance killing and imprisoning thousands.

The reaction of the international community has varied widely. In all cases, the media to include social networking sites alerted the world to the existence of the struggles against existing regimes and the violent methods employed by these regimes to put down mostly peaceful demonstrations. However, the international community's response to these protests has been anything but consistent. For example, in the case of Libya, the Arab League supported international action, going so far as to provide military aircraft from Jordan, UAE and Qatar in support of the United Nations authorized no-fly zone. Qatar unilaterally went even further in its support of rebel forces when it

provided arms and training in military tactics to rebel forces.² The United Nations responded by issuing two Security Council Resolutions authorizing economic sanctions and the no-fly zone. The United States and Europe joined the Arab League by employing the military arm of NATO to protect civilian lives from loyal Qaddafi forces, ultimately enabling the eventual overthrow of the Qaddafi regime by the National Transitional Council.

In contrast, the response to the situation in Syria has been relatively muted. In this case, the Arab League eventually sent observers in an attempt to monitor a U.N. proposal for President al-Assad to transition peacefully; this mission was quickly pulled out as violence continued and monitors' lives appeared in danger. Meanwhile, Chinese and Russian vetoes have stymied action by the U.N. Security Council. Absent Security Council support, Europe and the United States show little willingness to engage military instruments of power, but have instituted economic and financial sanctions.

In the United States, debate over whether or not the U.S. should become involved in countries embroiled by the Arab Spring has led to divisions in the Congress. The House of Representatives divided along political lines over whether the President exceeded the war powers authority by using the U.S. military to enforce the no-fly zone over Libya. Meanwhile, Republican Congressmen continue to debate the merits of military intervention in Syria amongst themselves, with Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham calling for air strikes to protect civilian lives, while fellow Republicans Speaker of the House John Boehner, Senator Susan Collins and Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney call for restraint.³

The American public appears to have little empathy for events unfolding in the Middle East, especially when considering the United States has been at war for nearly eleven years in Afghanistan and has just recently redeployed its combat forces out of a nine year war in Iraq.⁴ After all this time, and considering the thousands of American dead and wounded, it is no wonder the American people and Congress are generally leery of sending any sort of military package to fight in yet another Middle Eastern country. Despite this reluctance, President Obama chose to support our European allies under the authority of the United Nations in establishing a no-fly zone to protect Libyan civilians from military attacks by forces loyal to Muammar Qaddafi. In addition to deploying combat aircraft over Libya, the United States established command and control for the mission and supported coalition forces with aerial refueling, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) as well as other capabilities which the United States is especially well suited to provide. In time NATO assumed the lead role in enforcing the no-fly zone with the U.S. Armed Forces in a support role. The contributions of three Arab countries, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are noteworthy as they also provided aircraft in support of both U.S. and NATO operations.⁵ Although UNSCR 1973 justified Western intervention in Libya, the contributions by Arab states put an Arab “face” on the United Nations effort to protect Libyan civilians.

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad continues to kill dozens of his citizens every week, with no indication of U.S. military intervention on the horizon. A loosely organized opposition military force called the Free Syrian Army operates from across the Turkish border and makes daily requests to the United States and the international community for military support against military forces loyal to the Syrian government; political

groups vie for international recognition to establish legitimacy in the eyes of Syrians.⁶ Meanwhile, the February 2012 Friends of Syria⁷ conference organized in Tunisia, requested the United Nations to begin planning for a Syria peacekeeping mission. “Many Syrian activists criticized as more bluster than action the conference's final statement, which called for a peacekeeping mission, tougher economic sanctions and grudging recognition of the opposition Syrian National Council.”⁸ While the United States, European powers and the Arab League agree that military action is not feasible in Syria, other instruments of national and international power utilizing economic and diplomatic means have so far failed to show any sign of effectiveness in ending the bloodshed in Syria.

Why has the reaction in the international community and specifically the United States been so divergent in these two countries? This paper will examine the Arab Spring in Libya and Syria, comparing how the United States approached each of the respective situations. In Libya all elements of national and international power, to include military airstrikes, were brought to bear. Airstrikes targeting key elements of Qaddafi's military and security forces contributed to the removal of a hated, ruthless leader from power. In Syria however, government violence has continued unabated for nearly a year, while the civilian death toll continues to rise and the destruction of civil infrastructure by Syrian security forces in cities like Homs continues.

Libya and Syria: Two Different Models of U.S. Involvement

The Libyan Revolution began in February 2011 with the emergence of a somewhat coherent, loosely organized opposition firmly situated in the eastern part of Libya, the traditional adversary of Tripoli. A civil war ensued which for nine months pitted government troops still loyal to the autocratic leader of Libya against the

opposition which quickly grew and became stronger with the aid of defectors from the Libyan armed forces. A March 2011 United Nations Resolution authorized an international coalition initially led by the United States and then later by NATO, to enforce a no-fly zone to protect civilian lives from Libyan military strikes. This no-fly zone effectively provided opposition military forces with secure bases from which they could operate unmolested by the Libyan military. By November of the same year, under continued military, political, and economic pressure from the international community, the Libyan government fell and Muammar Qaddafi was dead.

In Syria, a different story unfolded. Initially slow to build, the Syrian Arab Spring gained momentum from March 2011 incorporating several of Syria's urban areas including Dara'a, Aleppo, Baniyas, Hama, Homs, Dayr az Zawr, and even suburbs of Damascus in anti-government demonstrations by the end of the summer. President Bashar al-Assad at first appeared willing to compromise and introduce limited reforms. But as demonstrations continued to grow in size and scope, al-Assad began to blame foreign terrorists for fomenting violence against the government. He used this excuse to employ heavy handed tactics against the still largely peaceful demonstrators. One year later, the Syrian revolution continues with estimates of casualties in the thousands, while the international community takes little action beyond economic sanctions and diplomatic calls for al-Assad to step down.

The Libyan Revolution Topples Qaddafi

Inspired by the apparent success in toppling the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, opposition groups encouraged Libyans to take to the streets in Benghazi to protest the regime of Muammar Qaddafi and demand an end to his nearly 42 year rule. Protests which began on February 15, 2011, were followed by a "Day of Rage" on February 17.

Libyan security forces responded with violent attacks against protestors and over the next several days, several clashes between protestors and loyalist security forces led to more violence and the deaths of both protestors and security forces. As the opposition movement grew and gained popularity, Qaddafi deployed his military forces to eastern Libya in an attempt to destroy the rebellion rising from Benghazi.

As violence against opposition forces and innocent civilians grew, the United States strongly supported United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1970 (February 26, 2011) condemning violence and abuses of human rights by the Libyan government, freezing all Libyan assets and instituting an embargo on the import or export of arms from Libya.⁹ This was followed a month later by UNSCR 1973 (March 17, 2011), which demanded an immediate cease-fire against civilian targets, authorized member states to take all actions necessary to protect civilians while excluding foreign forces on the ground in Libya, and imposed a no-fly zone over Libya on any and all aircraft excluding those under humanitarian purposes and those flown by foreign governments while taking action to protect civilian lives.¹⁰ The original draft language of UNSCR 1973, jointly written by the United Kingdom, France and Lebanon was less strongly worded proposing simply a ban on all flights in Libya, authorizing member states to enforce the no-fly zone and calling on them to participate in the military operations to enforce it. The United States felt the draft did not go far enough and pushed for stronger language. According to a BBC report the day following release of the resolution, "...the US said the UN should go further and a new strongly-worded draft resolution was put forward calling for "all necessary measures short of an occupation force" to protect civilians under threat of attack."¹¹ The United States then joined ten¹²

other members of the Security Council in approving the more strongly written resolution. Russia and China, both permanent members of the Security Council with veto authority, chose to abstain along with the three remaining members of Brazil, India and Germany.

After consulting with European leaders and under the auspices of UNSCR 1973, the United States led military planning to impose the no-fly zone. The U.S. and coalition air campaign Operation ODYSSEY DAWN began on March 19, 2011 with French, U.S. and U.K strikes against Libyan air defense networks, offensive ground forces, and lines of communication. Citing international and U.S. interests in his remarks on Libya on March 19, 2011, President Obama justified intervention in Libya despite reservations in the Department of Defense and Congress, saying “today we are part of a broad coalition. We are answering the calls of a threatened people. And we are acting in the interests of the United States and the world.”¹³ The national interests the President referred to are provided in his speech of March 28, 2011 focusing on the need to prevent a humanitarian disaster:

Moreover, America has an important strategic interest in preventing Qaddafi from overrunning those who oppose him. A massacre would have driven thousands of additional refugees across Libya’s borders, putting enormous strains on the peaceful – yet fragile – transitions in Egypt and Tunisia. The democratic impulses that are dawning across the region would be eclipsed by the darkest form of dictatorship, as repressive leaders concluded that violence is the best strategy to cling to power. The writ of the United Nations Security Council would have been shown to be little more than empty words, crippling that institution’s future credibility to uphold global peace and security. So while I will never minimize the costs involved in military action, I am convinced that a failure to act in Libya would have carried a far greater price for America.¹⁴

As the violence continued and Qaddafi defiantly maintained his position of power, the US public debated the wisdom of military intervention. In response to these signs of flagging public support, the US responded by pressing others – particularly European

countries, to take a more visible and leading role. By March 27th, NATO had taken over enforcement of the no-fly zone under the name Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR, with the United States primarily in a support role providing intelligence, logistical support, search and rescue, and electronic jamming of Libyan air defenses.¹⁵ In his remarks to the American people on March 28, 2011, President Obama highlighted the success of military actions:

We struck regime forces approaching Benghazi to save that city and the people within it. We hit Qaddafi's troops in neighboring Ajdabiya, allowing the opposition to drive them out. We hit Qaddafi's air defenses, which paved the way for a no-fly zone. We targeted tanks and military assets that had been choking off towns and cities, and we cut off much of their source of supply...I said that America's role would be limited; that we would not put ground troops into Libya; that we would focus our unique capabilities on the front end of the operation and that we would transfer responsibility to our allies and partners.¹⁶

His remarks, which targeted not only the Libyan people and the international community but also U.S. taxpayers and Congress, reinforced the President's message that U.S. intervention was limited to airstrikes and that no U.S. forces were, or would be deployed, on the ground in Libya.

Despite reassurances by the President that he would limit U.S. involvement, many in Congress, including Texas Republican Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, disapproved of the President's commitment of U.S. military forces in Libya, believing it was not in the vital interests of the United States to intervene. In her blog of June 24, 2011 Senator Hutchinson remarked that,

In Libya, our nation is currently providing the lion's share of the resources and funding for another NATO mission. We are on track to spend more than \$1 billion of U.S. taxpayer dollars this fiscal year on operations involving Libya, an operation that I believe is not in the vital interests of the United States."¹⁷

The debate in Congress was divided not only along political lines, but within the parties as well:

Republican Senator John McCain from Arizona was a vocal supporter of early and increased U.S. intervention in Libya. In April, McCain traveled to a rebel stronghold in Libya amid the fighting between rebels and government forces. He returned in September, after Gadhafi ^(sic) had been ousted. He criticized the administration for not intervening militarily in Libya more quickly than it did to help end the bloodshed and reinforce the rebels' efforts to oust Gadhafi ^(sic). When the U.S. did intervene, McCain denounced House conservatives for opposing President Barack Obama's decision to join NATO airstrikes against the Gadhafi ^(sic) regime.¹⁸

Regardless of broad Congressional opposition to U.S. intervention, the United States remained a critical partner in the seven month long NATO Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR ensuring the safety of Libyan civilians, as well the survival of the National Transitional Council. The coalition established for UNIFIED PROTECTOR included close allies of the United States including the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Spain, Greece, and Turkey, as well as Arab partners including Qatar, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁹ In fact, Qatar was one of the most outspoken proponents for support to Libyan oppositionists, going so far as providing weapons, and hundreds of Qatari troops on the ground to train and plan operations for the National Transitional Council forces.²⁰

After eight months of civil war, seven of which included U.S. and NATO air support, the National Transitional Council announced on October 20, 2011 the death of Muammar Qaddafi. The coalition established to protect innocent Libyan lives under the auspices of the United Nations played a key role in the success of the National Transitional Council in defeating Muammar Qaddafi's loyalist forces. With the death of Qaddafi President Obama and the leaders of Europe and the Arab League achieved the

strategic end state of ensuring the safety of Libyan civilians opposed to the Qaddafi regime.

Syria Boils Over and Keeps Simmering

The Arab Spring was slower to take hold in Syria, arguably due to the Syrian government's history of heavy handed justice in dealing with anti government protests and insurrection. The Syrian Ba'ath Party has been led by the al-Assad family since 1970, when Hafez al-Assad became prime minister of Syria and later president, following a bloodless intra-party coup.

In February 1982, then president al-Assad brutally put down a growing Islamic insurrection led by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian city of Hama by utilizing tanks, artillery and airstrikes destroying one third of the city and massacring an estimated 5,000 – 10,000 Syrian citizens. This action, although weakly condemned by the international community, did not end with the removal of Hafez al-Assad but rather ensconced him deeply in power over a Syrian population which learned not to cross their ruthless ruler.

From the lack of U.S., U.N. and international action to diplomatically, economically or militarily punish the Syrian Ba'athist regime, Hafez al-Assad's notion that he could use violence and torture to control the Syrian people at will was reinforced. Thomas Friedman, in a 2005 New York Times op-ed piece, had the following to say about Syrian reactions to antagonism, "When Syria's Baath regime feels its back up against the wall, it always resorts to "Hama Rules""²¹, a term coined by Friedman after he visited the city of Hama and experienced firsthand, the destruction there. Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000 and was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad who maintained several of his father's political and military advisors. When the Arab Spring

finally came to Syria in March 2011, Bashar was quick to institute tactics learned from his father, and supported by his old mentors.

What began in March 2011 as a relatively small, peaceful demonstration demanding the release from jail of fifteen teenage boys in the southern Syrian town of Dara'a, turned into widespread demonstrations that swept across Syria from south to north. The youth, accused of painting anti government graffiti on walls, were allegedly tortured by Syrian security forces while in government custody. Outraged, the Syrian people began to demand a change from the al-Assad dynasty, with chants of "the people want the regime to fall".²² The citizens of Dara'a were outraged over state security service atrocities so heinous as to be excessive even by Syrian standards.²³ Unlike in 1982 when Hama stood alone against the al-Assad regime, across the country protests began to spring up. Small at first, and then growing in size as Syrian youth became more emboldened, the Syrian government resorted to 'Hama Rules', sniping from rooftops and sweeping individual protestors into dungeons.²⁴

As the number and size of protests across Syria began to grow, President al-Assad claimed his willingness to consider reforms requested by the Syrian people. In late March, not long after it became evident that protests were not abating, al-Assad announced he would lift the nearly half-century old state of emergency implemented by his father. The Emergency Law effectively suspended constitutional protections for Syrians, allowing for martial law, and was formally in effect through a declared State of Emergency since 1963.²⁵ The Emergency Law was lifted in April 2011, although this effort by al-Assad to reform was seen as a hollow action by the Syrian people.²⁶ Syrian security forces continued to use violent methods to stem the growing anti-government

demonstrations. “The long-promised reforms legalized “peaceful protests” – code for those approved by the government – while the Interior Ministry warned in a statement that it would bring to bear the full breadth of the law against any other kind of demonstration.”²⁷ As Friedman predicted, with his back against the wall, al-Assad resorted to the lessons of his father and ‘Hama Rules’.

President Bashar al-Assad, who inherited Syria’s harsh dictatorship from his father, Hafez al-Assad, at first wavered between force and hints of reform. But in April, just days after lifting the country’s decades-old state of emergency, he set off the first of what became a series of withering crackdowns, sending tanks into restive cities as security forces opened fire on demonstrators.²⁸

According to numerous unconfirmed sources within Syria, as well as human rights organizations and independent journalists²⁹, President Bashar al-Assad was quick to blame foreign intervention and terrorists for stirring the insurrection and resorted to his father’s techniques to put down the growing demonstrations. Security forces, especially the widely feared Mukhabbarat, allegedly used torture techniques after arresting leaders of the demonstrations.^{30 31}

In a sign that al-Assad’s control was not total however, military forces, primarily made up of conscripts, performed in unpredictable ways with many soldiers refusing to fire on unarmed civilians and instead deserting from the army to join the demonstrators.³² Although it is unknown exactly how many defectors have joined opposition movements, a New York Times article quoted an American official as stating as many as 10,000 Syrian soldiers had defected by October 2011 while Israeli daily Haaretz quoted “western intelligence agencies” as claiming entire units had deserted en masse.³³ While many allegedly deserted, al-Assad, through his Allawite power base, managed to maintain the loyalty of enough units in large enough strength to continue

his brutal crackdown. This split in loyalties however provided evidence that President al-Assad, the Commander in Chief of the Syrian Armed Forces, did not have as strong a grip on his own military as might have been suspected.^{34 35} Despite a large portion of senior military leaders remaining loyal to al-Assad due to religious ties through the minority Allawite sect, the armed resistance has continued to grow through desertions. Coordinated attacks including targeted killings of regime leaders throughout the country are increasing in frequency. Attacks by rebel forces in February and March 2012 even approached the capitol of Damascus.³⁶

U.S. and International Reactions to Syria

Unlike the quick and decisive response authorized by the United Nations in Libya, the international community remains divided on how it should react to demonstrations and the resulting government crackdown in Syria. During the initial Friends of Syria meeting on February 24, 2012, these divisions became evident. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Faisal called for the arming of opposition forces, while Qatar and Tunisia called for Arab states to put troops on the ground in Syria. The U.K. clearly ruled out military intervention in Syria, but the U.S., France and Turkey remained silent.³⁷ While the United Nations estimates that over 8,000 Syrian civilians and security forces have been killed, the United States and the international community to date have mostly used only strongly worded statements and sanctions in condemning President al-Assad and the Syrian government. In his remarks on Syria of April 22, 2011, President Obama called for an end to violence in Syria:

The United States condemns in the strongest possible terms the use of force by the Syrian government against demonstrators. This outrageous use of violence to quell protests must come to an end now. We regret the loss of life and our thoughts are with the families and loved ones of the victims, and with the Syrian people in this challenging time.³⁸

Three sanctions imposed by the Obama Administration were designed to deepen the financial isolation of the al-Assad regime and further disrupt its ability to finance a campaign of violence against the Syrian people.³⁹

- Executive Order 13572 of April 2011: Blocked financial contributions to certain named persons involved in human rights violations as a result of government crack downs on pro-democracy demonstrators.⁴⁰
- Executive Order 13573 of May 2011: Blocked property or interests in property, located in the United States, of senior Syrian officials.⁴¹
- Executive Order 13582 of August 2011: Blocked property or interests in property, located in the United States, of the Government of Syria.⁴²

Sanctions work best when they are multilateral, massive, immediate, and used to achieve relatively minor policy changes from countries that value world opinion.

Economic sanctions work poorly as a tool to coerce significant policy shifts and they work best when used against countries where the common people, who are most immediately and directly affected by any sanction, have some political power.⁴³ In the case of Syria, sanctions have had little, if any, effect in coercing President Assad to embrace U.S. demands.

In December 2012, the Arab League initiated a monitoring committee to oversee a plan which would have seen President al-Assad hand power over to his Deputy and begin a transition to peace between the warring factions. However in January 2012, six Gulf Cooperation Council states withdrew their representatives from the monitoring mission amid increased violence by the Syrian government against Syrian civilians.

A draft U.N. Security Council Resolution supporting the Arab League's peace plan and calling on all armed parties in Syria to cease violence immediately and for the

government of Syria to cease all violations of human rights, was vetoed by Russia and China, permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, in February 2012.⁴⁴ The United States felt challenged to sway the Russian and Chinese Ambassadors to the U.N. to support widely accepted international plans to peacefully end the violence in Syria and bring about a change in Syrian leadership. Russian and Chinese intransigence appeared to change suddenly when on March 21, 2012 all fifteen members of the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to approve a Presidential Statement expressing its “gravest concern at the deteriorating situation in Syria.”⁴⁵ The Presidential Statement, although not an enforceable statement like a Security Council Resolution, “calls for all combatants to immediately stop fighting, for the military to withdraw from populated areas, for a United Nations-supervised truce and for the provision of humanitarian assistance, the release of all arbitrarily detained people, freedom of movement for journalists and freedom for peaceful demonstrations.”⁴⁶ As of March 22, 2012, fighting in Syria continues despite the U.N. Presidential Statement.

What makes the Libya and Syria models different?

Four primary reasons explain U.S. responses to Libya and Syria: 1) U.S. support for European oil interests in Libya, 2) dissimilar levels of opposition organization in Libya and Syria, 3) Russian and Chinese support for the al-Assad regime in Syria, and 4) the potential that continued violence in Syria could destabilize the region. The next four sections will explain in detail how these four areas have impacted the U.S. response.

U.S. Support for European Oil Interests

European nations such as the U.K., Germany, and France, are large recipients of Libyan exports with Libya being the third largest supplier of oil to the European Union due to its proximity to the European continent. Prior to the start of the Arab Spring,

European Union countries received approximately 10% of overall crude oil imports from Libya. In comparison, Syria is the 14th largest source of oil for the European Union with less than 1% of imports coming from a country which also enjoys access to the Mediterranean Sea and relative proximity to Europe.⁴⁷ In supporting European requests for establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya, President Obama supported the United States' European allies in maintaining access to Libyan oil. With regard to Syria on the other hand, because Syrian exports to Europe are small in comparison to those of Libya, the European countries are less inclined to feel the impact of reduced Syrian oil imports. With less to lose economically in Syria, there is less support to take action in support of opposition forces as in Libya.

Lack of an Organized Opposition

In Libya, the opposition established itself quickly in Benghazi, an historical rival of Tripoli since the 7th Century BC when the two areas were known as Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. The National Transitional Council (NTC) was established and declared itself the legitimate opposition government, immediately working to garner regional and international support. The NTC provided the United States and the international community with an organized and coherent opposition government with which they could focus their diplomatic efforts. Established on February 27, 2011, the United States recognized the NTC as the legitimate Libyan government approximately four months later on July 15, 2011.⁴⁸ The Arab League and the European Union also recognized the legitimacy of the NTC and on September 16, 2011 the United Nations General Assembly voted to give Libya's seat to the NTC.⁴⁹

In comparison, no single unified opposition has appeared in Syria during the now twelve month long uprising. Several military officers who deserted and sought refuge in

Turkey organized themselves as the Free Syrian Army, a mostly military oriented organization with intentions to fight the Syrian Army and lead the opposition against al-Assad. Despite its growing ranks of deserters including several general officers, the Free Syrian Army has been unable to organize the various opposition groups into a cohesive, united group. Other organizations appeared throughout Syria without any clear organizing body or coherent policy stance, but during the February 24, 2012 Friends of Syria meeting in Tunis, the Syrian National Council announced it had managed to unite the major armed groups in Syria into a military bureau to serve as an opposition Ministry of Defense with the Free Syrian Army apparently at its head.⁵⁰

Divisions remained however, as a rival opposition group, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change boycotted the Friends of Syria meeting, claiming their disappointment at the preferential treatment they perceived was being lauded on the Syrian National Council.⁵¹ The failure of Syrian opposition groups to unite is a strong impediment to acquiring U.S. and international support in Syria. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta expressed his concern regarding the lack of a cohesive Syrian opposition when he testified in front of Congress of March 7, 2012 saying, "With regard to Syria, for us to act unilaterally would be a mistake...It is not clear what constitutes the Syrian armed opposition. There has been no single unifying military alternative that can be recognized, appointed or contacted."⁵²

Russian and Chinese Support for Syria

Russia and China, both permanent members of the U.N. Security Council with veto authority, maintain a rather consistent position against U.N. resolutions allowing foreign intervention in the business of sovereign nations. With regard to Libya, the language of UNSCR 1973 addressed the need to protect civilian lives, as opposed to

removing Qaddafi from power, a step that surely would have invited Russian and Chinese vetoes. Based on historical precedence, it appears Russia and China felt confident no veto was necessary as regime change was not the specified goal of UNSCR 1973.

Meanwhile, both countries have successfully blocked any United Nations Security Council Resolution against Syria or the al-Assad regime. Russia maintains close historic ties with Syria that go back four decades. In 2010, Russia had an approximately \$1.5 billion arms trade with Syria.⁵³ Under U.N. sanctions or external military intervention, Russia stands to lose a significant amount of revenue, not to mention basing rights in Tartus, which serves as Russia's only remaining Navy base in the Mediterranean.

With regard to China, one thought is speculation that its burgeoning trade partnership with Syria led to its veto of the draft resolution condemning violence there. China and Syria have increased trade considerably with the volume of trade reaching \$2.48 billion in 2010.⁵⁴ Chinese investment has also increased over the past several years with China coming in as the second largest non-Arab investor in Syria in 2006, accounting for \$100 million out of the \$800 million in non-Arab investment funds that year.⁵⁵ Beyond trade and investment in Syria, China seems to have maintained a reluctant partnership with its Communist cousin Russia. Siding with Russia on the U.N. veto can be seen as a way to maintain the weak Sino-Russian relationship. However, the simplest reason may be offered by He Wenping, Professor and Director of African Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "China opposes the use of threat or force to achieve regime change in other countries. This is consistent with China's

long-standing diplomacy principle. It is also not acceptable for China to rush a U.N. vote without sufficient consultation."⁵⁶

Although not going as far as supporting a UNSCR on Syria, both Russia and China also joined the other members of the Security Council in stating they “deplore the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation”.⁵⁷ This could signal an eventual change in the stance of Russia and China toward Syria, leaving Iran as al-Assad’s lone backer in the international community. Although direct military intervention may remain off the table and out of the DIME discussion, willingness by Russia and China to support the United Nations and push al-Assad toward a diplomatic solution may lead to al-Assad’s eventual removal from office.

In an interesting turn of events, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, in an interview with British journalists on March 1, 2012, signaled a possible reversal in Russia’s staunch anti sanctions stance. Putin told the London-based Times in an interview that “we need to make sure they stop killing each other.” The Times cited Putin as saying “we only have interest in the conflict being resolved.”⁵⁸ The opening statement in The Times exclusive stated, “Russia last night signaled a dramatic shift in its policy towards Syria, insisting that it had no special relationship with President al-Assad and that it was up to the Syrians to decide who should rule their country.”⁵⁹ In supporting the March 21, 2012 Presidential Statement by the U.N., Russia and China have once again signaled their growing weariness in supporting the al-Assad regime, and perhaps a willingness to support future Security Council Resolutions.

Destabilizing Effect on the Region

To Iran, Syria is the proxy through which it supports and arms Hezbollah in Lebanon and until recently Hamas in Gaza, in its “cold war” against Israel. Hamas

maintained a strong leadership presence in Damascus and received weapons, funding and other support from Iran, through Syria. The relationship was damaged when Hamas leader Khaled Meshal left Damascus in February 2012, effectively closing Hamas' headquarters in Syria. Officially stating security concerns, speculation exists that the Hamas split with Syria is in response to its brutal crackdown against mostly Sunni Muslims, from whence Hamas gets its support.⁶⁰

Hezbollah continues to maintain close ties to Iran through its offices in Syria as well as in Lebanon. In Syria, reports surfaced of Iranian intelligence operatives and Quds Force soldiers advising, training and arming Syrian government forces loyal to President al-Assad.⁶¹ If true, Iranian activity in Syria demonstrates Iran's interest in maintaining the al-Assad government in power to ensure Iran's continued link to Hezbollah and the possible restoration of links to Hamas, a link that is crucial to Iran's ability to harass Israel through its proxies

In his statement on Syria on August 18, 2011, President Obama clearly stated his belief that al-Assad must step down from power and allow a peaceful transition of power in Syria, "We have consistently said that President al-Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."⁶² Despite the President's call for al-Assad to allow a peaceful transition of power, Department of Defense leaders remain concerned about the destabilizing impact that al-Assad's removal from office may have on the region.

If the al-Assad regime were to fall, whether from U.S. and international efforts, or through the actions of opposition forces, it is not difficult to envision a scenario in which

regional war could break out with loyalist Syrian forces allied with Iran on one side and opposition forces supported by Turkey and the Gulf States on the other. Saudi Arabia has long feared the growing threat from Iran to its position as the Caretaker of the Two Holy Sites and leader within the Muslim community. Turkey currently maintains good relations with Iran, but has always vied with Iran for greater influence in the region. In this scenario, Saudi Arabia and Turkey could lead the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in supporting moderate opposition forces against Syrian elements aligned with Iran.

U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford testified, “The fractious opposition, with Islamist and secular elements touting competing visions for a future society, has not even united around a solid transition plan.”⁶³ For Western powers, determining which opposition organization to support is difficult. Syrian opposition groups span a wide spectrum from secularists to Islamists, and within religious and ethnic lines including Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Druze and Kurds. Sunni Muslims make up 74% of the population, but are split along regional and tribal lines, including most of the Kurdish minority in northeast Syria. The Sunni Muslim Brotherhood which was stifled by Hafez al-Assad in the 1982 Hama Massacre is re-emerging as a possible contender for political power in Syria, but is not widely accepted by secular Sunni Muslims. At 13% of the population, Shiite Islam is divided among Kurds, Druze and Ismailis. While generally rejected by both Sunni and Shiite Muslims, the minority Allawite sect of Islam (7% of the population) maintains power in Syria through the al-Assad family. The regime retains a large loyal military base as the majority of senior military leaders and intelligence agents are Allawite.⁶⁴

In the event of a regional war, the additional threat of Israel taking unilateral action against Syria or Iran must be considered. Unilateral military strikes by Israel, either preemptively, or in response to Hezbollah or direct Iranian aggression, could dissolve an Arab coalition, due to the difficulty of maintaining popular support for any war in which Muslims fight against Muslims.

Conclusion

The United States reacted differently to the Arab Spring in Libya and Syria based on four primary factors including support for European oil interests in Libya, dissimilar levels of opposition organization in Libya and Syria, continued Russian and Chinese support for the al-Assad regime in Syria, and the potential for regional destabilization that could occur following international intervention in Syria.

NATO involvement in Libya served to bolster the fledgling National Transitional Council (NTC) and its armed rebellion, bringing an end to the reign of Muammar Qaddafi. Despite no love loss for Qaddafi in the United States, many members of the U.S. government and the Department of Defense felt the United States should not have become involved in a civil war in Libya.⁶⁵ While the United States protected innocent Libyan lives from Qaddafi's military attacks, and supported European requests to protect access to Libyan trade, debate over the United States' role in Libya continued in Congress. Meanwhile, Congress and White House continue to debate the merits of external intervention to stop Syrian violence against its own civilian population.

After watching what happened in Libya when UNSCR 1973 enabled opposition forces to end the autocratic reign of Muammar Qaddafi, Russia and China took action to ensure no U.N. resolutions against Syria would lead to the overthrow of the al-Assad government. Although the two nations joined the majority of countries in denouncing

the killing of innocent civilians in Syria, both drew a line at enacting resolutions that would interfere in the sovereignty of Syria, a position Russia and China routinely reinforce. Despite Russian and Chinese desires that President al-Assad remain in power, his days may in fact be numbered as President Obama stated so many months ago. Russia's and China's apparent willingness recently to distance themselves from al-Assad may signal a transformation in the international community, garnering the support necessary to convince al-Assad to leave office peacefully. As Russian and Chinese officials continue to grow increasingly dissatisfied with al-Assad's brutal methods, they move further away from support for his regime, and closer to supporting U.N. action.

If the Syrian National Council, with its military wing incorporating the Free Syrian Army can rally enough support from the various opposition groups throughout Syria, it may gain the recognition necessary from the United States and the international community to topple the al-Assad government. Meanwhile the United States should continue in its efforts to convince Russia and China to support United Nations' endeavors within the General Assembly and the Security Council in condemning Bashar al-Assad.

The United States remains cognizant of the potential destabilizing effects on the region if al-Assad is forcefully removed from power without broad international support. Preferring not to act unilaterally but rather within an international coalition of willing and supportive nations, the United States should continue to build consensus within the United Nations and with the Arab League before resorting to military force. During a March hearing on Syria before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary

Panetta voiced his concerns regarding military objectives and consensus for military action,

As Secretary of Defense, before I recommend that we put our sons and daughters in uniform in harm's way, I've got to make very sure that we know what the mission is. I've got to make very sure that we know whether we can achieve that mission, at what price, and whether or not it will make matters better or worse...obviously the administration believes that every effort ought to be made to deal with those concerns in the international setting to try to build the kind of international consensus that worked in Libya and that can work in Syria if we can develop that.⁶⁶

While the use of the military option remains available as an instrument of national and international power, the United States maintains its commitment to allow the diplomatic and economic efforts already in place, to mature. But in recognizing the role of the military, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said the U.S. Armed Forces was prepared to take action if necessary.

With other conscientious nations, the United States is applying diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime to compel Assad and his accomplices to stop killing their own. Our military's role has been limited to this point to sharing information with our regional partners. But should we be called on to help secure U.S. interests in other ways, we will be ready. We maintain an agile regional and global posture. We have solid military relationships with every country on Syria's borders.⁶⁷

The situation in Syria is dire, with estimates of over 8,000 killed and unknown scores wounded. An additional civil war in the Middle East Region should not be in the interests of the United States and the international community. Only through continuous Arab League, U.N., and U.S. efforts at diplomacy will Bashar al-Assad be convinced to stop the violence against his own people and allow for a peaceful transition of power.

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